

**“There Is Always More to Know and Understand”**

**John 16:12–15**

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Years ago, a doctoral classmate and I were talking about musicians we knew and liked. When he was in college, he knew the Indigo Girls before they were the Indigo Girls. They were just two young women in the same dorm people loved to hear play their guitars and sing. I knew Harry Chapin, though not well, and my roommate Mac and I were the two students with guitars people in our dorm gathered to hear.

We never made it as big as the Indigo Girls, but we made it further than the band we were in, the one pictured in the most recent issue of *First Foundations*. It was doomed by our shortsightedness. Our drummer told us about an Irish band made up of four guys our age who decided that, rather than performing Contemporary Christian Music, they would take the Christian message of love and justice into the larger world of secular music. “Maybe we could do that?” he said. “No,” we said, “That will never work!” Well, our band, Phoenix, lasted a couple years. That Irish band, U2, is still together, and doing pretty well.

When I told this story to my classmate, he said, “Oh, those guys... did they ever find what they were looking for?” He was referring to U2’s song “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” and he might have been kidding, but you don’t mess with U2! “Yes, they did,” I said, “The song refers to bonds being broken and chains being loosed by the One who carried the cross of my shame! It’s just that there is always more to know and understand about life and faith!” “Okay.” he said.

I would give a gentler response today, but I still think U2 expresses an authentic Christian message, and I still believe there is always more to know and understand about life and faith, more to look for. In our reading from John 16, Jesus seems to agree. “I still have many things to say to you,” he tells his disciples, “But you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”

Even Jesus cannot convey the whole truth because his disciples aren't ready to hear it—they cannot “bear” it. It is the same verb used in John 19 wherein Jesus “bears” the cross. It is the word Mary Magdalene uses when she thinks the Risen Christ is the gardener and wonders who has carried away Jesus' body. Thus, to “bear” the truth, the whole truth, is no small matter. A rabbi once said that anyone who takes the legal oath, “I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” perjures himself because no one knows the whole truth.

The oath has a specific context, but the broader claim is valid. No one knows the whole truth about life and faith. To claim to know it all about the world in which there are 200 billion trillion stars is pure foolishness. To claim to know it all about God is blasphemous. In biblical tradition, to equate anything with God, even our understanding of God, is idolatry. There is always more to know and understand, as the mystery of the Holy Trinity we celebrate today makes clear.

This may seem obvious, and this is a church that values lifelong learning. It's why we have a curriculum guide which shapes the way we learn throughout life about God, Jesus, service, commitment and love. It's why we speak of growing through different stages of life when we dedicate children. We don't graduate from Christian learning at five, twelve or eighteen. We don't stop learning about anything else. We have to keep up with technology, our knowledge and skills base, our relationships and the world. Why would we even consider functioning with a third-grade level of understanding about God and Christian faith?

In his book *Reaching: The Journey to Fulfillment* Morton Kelsey says this about the giant sequoia. “This tree is thirty-five hundred years old; most of recorded human history has taken place within its lifetime. It is nearly three hundred feet high, a hundred feet around, and over thirty feet in diameter — and *it is still growing* (p. 12).” He says this not simply to note the magnificence of trees, though this is worth noting, but to offer inspiration for the human and Christian calling to continue learning and growing throughout life, following the biblical admonition to grow up into Christ in every way (Ephesians 4) and Jesus' own reference to hungering and thirsting for righteousness (Matthew 5).

In his farewell address to his congregants in Plymouth departing to take their faith to a new world, early seventeenth-century English Separatist John Robinson offered words of encouragement that they would continue learning wherever they went because “he was confident that the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth from his holy word (*Hypocrisie Vnmasked*, Edward Winslow, London, 1646, pp. 97-98).” The Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth to this day.

Our challenge is that the human temptation to seek certainty, which is always lurking somewhere deep within us, is much more powerful in unsettled times like ours. With a pandemic lingering, a war in Ukraine terrorizing one nation and dragging down the entire world, gun violence escalating, political division intensifying, inflation rising, and almost everything we thought we knew about matters of identity and religious belief being called into question, we yearn for something fixed and solid. With everything nailed down coming loose, we long for something about which we can be certain. Thus, not surprisingly, fundamentalism has become an attractive option.

There are many kinds of fundamentalism — liberal and conservative, scientific and religious. Fundamentalism is more of a psychological construct than a specific ideology. It is driven by an obsession with certainty, a desire to have the one right answer. And to be sure, there are some ultimate realities. There are things we can place our trust in, like the goodness of God and the mercy of Christ. In our reading from Romans, the Apostle Paul says God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us, and in Romans 8 he says that nothing can separate us from this love.

But beyond this basic reality, scripture says faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). That’s what we are called to be about — things like faith, hope and love; not certainty. An Orthodox theologian began every lecture with these words. “About this I may be wrong.” He would then speak with conviction about what he believed to be true, but only after expressing humility and allowing space for others to disagree. That is a healthy posture for anyone who believes there is always more to know, and one

that helps the church. As William Sloane Coffin once said, we can build a community out of seekers of truth, but not out of possessors of truth.

But while we may long for more certainty than we can find, the fact that there is always more to know and understand is actually good news. It means we can always learn more, and it means we can always grow in our capacity to love. And that's what our journey is about, not just filling our heads with information and believing all the right things. Jesus says the Spirit will guide us into truth, but this truth is not just a set of instructions, it's a way of life, one shaped by our relationship with Jesus, one defined by love. It is encouraging to know that no matter how imperfectly we follow this path, we can always grow.

I was deeply moved this week by the story of a sixth-grade boy in Colorado who was only able to get four people to sign his yearbook, two teachers and two classmates. "Hope you make some more friends," he wrote to himself. His mother was brokenhearted. He had been bullied all year, and she had all she could take. So, she posted his picture on Facebook and begged parents to teach their children about bullying.

Word travelled to some older students at the school. One of them, an eleventh-grader, says she had been bullied earlier in life. She gathered a large number of friends who crashed the six-grader's classroom the next day, all asking to sign his yearbook. One student told the boy, "Whoever is trying to bring you down is already below you." At the end of the day, he had received over 100 signatures and messages, some phone numbers, and a gift bag. "It made me feel like I was not alone," the boy said, to which his mother added, "It made me feel like there's still hope, not just for (my son), but for the human family."

It is a wonderful story. We often fall woefully short of the calling to basic human decency, not to mention walking in Christlike paths of love. Like young people bullying someone who is vulnerable, we mistreat others far too often, especially in a time when we can attack people on social media without ever looking them in the face. But we can change. There is still hope, no matter how hopeless it may seem, because there is always more we can learn and we can always grow in our capacity love, if we are willing.